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### 'What festivals of atonement, what sacred games we have to invent' (Friedrich Nietzsche)

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**‘What festivals of atonement, what sacred games we have to invent’ (Friedrich Nietzsche): Modernist Tragedy After the Death of God**

i. The Death of God as The Death of Tragedy

He is gone!  
He himself has fled,  
My last, sole companion,  
My great enemy,  
My unknown,  
My Hangman-god!  
No! Comeback,  
With all your torments!<sup>1</sup>

This beautiful, aphoristic poem from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-91) describes a world devoid of God, where the cruellest form of torment that God can impose lies in his very absence. As George Bataille eloquently put it, ‘Nietzsche revealed this primordial fact: once God had been killed by the bourgeoisie, the immediate result would be catastrophic confusion, emptiness and even sinister impoverishment.’<sup>2</sup> Can this world, however, be described as a tragic world? Is there an idea of the tragic at work even while God is being killed and is this a particularly modern view of the tragic? All the elements are there: the void, the emptiness, the alienation, existential strangeness and formalist estrangement. Importantly in both *Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science* (1882) this death of God is itself *staged* like a tragedy. Zarathustra is not fooled by this actor-dramatist and unmasks, reveals the falseness of his proclamation above: ‘Stop, you actor. You fabricator! You liar from the heart!’<sup>3</sup> Equally importantly, in *The Gay Science* where the notorious phrase, ‘God is dead’, appears, God is not simply dead but killed in a collective ritual that mirrors the

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> George Bataille, ‘The “Old Mole” and the prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*’, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Alan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, p. 267.

*sparagmos* of Dionysus himself. And this death/murder leaves the actors /performers with a deep sense of the void, but also with the need to invent new rituals, possibly celebrating that very death: 'What festivals of atonement, what sacred games we have to invent'.<sup>4</sup>

This mirroring effect reverberates throughout all the discourses that conflate the death of God with the death of tragedy. The absence of the divine has been hailed as one of the reasons for the impossibility of tragedy within modernity, both as a motor for philosophical thinking (the void enacted above), *and* as a mode of performance. For this absence of God is seen as depriving tragedy of both its metaphysical dimension *and* its ritualistic discourses of performance ('What festivals? What sacred games?'). Is it significant that the death of God itself is staged like a tragedy? Somewhat incongruously, the philosopher who directed this death is also the architect of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the single most influential text on modernist performance and specifically on the modernist revival or re-birth of tragedy.

This chapter will look at the ways the difficult relationship between tragedy and Christianity is enacted through the modernist encounters with tragedy that in many ways attempt to reconcile the binary codified by Nietzsche, and expressed in *Ecce Homo* as 'Dionysus versus the Crucified'.<sup>5</sup> This binary itself has been problematized by René Girard<sup>6</sup> amongst others, highlighting the parallels and similarities between the two figures. There are several ways we can challenge this binary reading that conflates the death of God with the death of tragedy, and posits

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Vintage, 1974), p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> René Girard, 'Dionysus versus the Crucified', *MLN* Vol. 99, No. 4 French Issue (Sep., 1984): pp. 816-835, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2905504>.

tragedy as incompatible to both Christianity and modernity. From Raymond Williams to Terry Eagleton within the more materialist tradition of cultural critique, and in the more recent works of philosophically inclined classicists like Miriam Leonard<sup>7</sup> and James I Porter<sup>8</sup> the so called 'death of tragedy' thesis has been challenged and far from incompatible with modernity, tragedy re-surfaces as constitutive of the project of modernity itself.

Drawing on these existing traditions, this chapter will focus on the ways a performance imperative has inflected these debates and in particular a performance aesthetic that has been deeply influenced by Christian ritual with a strong attachment to the metaphysical and the divine. It will propose a reading of the intriguing interface between Christianity and Greek Tragedy in modernist performance, and the ways that this encounter was informed by Primitivism and Orientalism, particularly as this appears in the discourses of modernist anthropology. It will sketch out several test cases where this hypothesis is enacted as in the Christian tragedies of T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, or the performances of the *Miracle* and *Everyman* directed by Max Reinhardt. Equally fascinating as these attempts at a Christian tragedy might be the delineation of an anti-Christian tragedy, as we see in the work (and life) of Antonin Artaud, whom contemporary philosophers from Jacques Derrida to Gilles Deleuze view in a Nietzschean tradition, and whose drama is fuelled not so much by an absent God, by the presence of a gnostic, evil demiurge. The 'Cruelty' of Artaud's theatre might be at least partly due to its strong attachment, even in its negation, to a Christian theology and a tragic aesthetic of sacrifice. Either through his absence or

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<sup>7</sup> Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> James I Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

through his 'cruel' presence, the figure of God plays a considerable role in the modernist attempts at reviving tragedy.

Before we proceed with the close readings of specific performance events, it would be helpful to sketch out a broad framework for the genealogy that the work of Nietzsche on tragedy inhabits. In many ways he is both the result and the aberration of the so-called 'German cast' of Greek Tragedy. This is the philosophical tradition that initiates a split between tragedy as a literary form - a poetics, in the legacy of Aristotle – and tragedy as a philosophical category as something that pertains to life in general: an 'idea of the tragic'. This Kantian inspired philosophical tradition, part of the German legacy of Idealism and Romanticism, with its list of impressive protagonists (Schelling, Hegel, Winckelmann in the fine arts and archaeology and Lessing, Schlegel, Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, Heine amongst others in the literary arts and criticism) approaches the tragic as part of a metaphysical, ethical and universal quest where the ideal of aesthetic judgement occupies a privileged position. In the words of Peter Szondi: 'Since Aristotle we have a poetics of tragedy, only since Schelling a philosophy of the tragic'.<sup>9</sup> However, as Miriam Leonard claims, 'The philosophy of the tragic did not represent a departure from aesthetics and a refuge in metaphysics'; rather it proposed 'the elevation of aesthetics to a new position within philosophy'.<sup>10</sup> Tragedy, in this reading, is seen as adding an aestheticizing impulse to philosophy, one that is further highlighted within modernism by the introduction of a performance imperative.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Szondi. *Versuch über Tragische* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1961), 151. Quoted and analyzed in Simon Goldhill, 'Generalizing About Tragedy', in Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 45-65, p. 52. For an early twentieth century study of the centrality of 'the tragic' for German Idealism see, E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece Over Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities*, p. 43.

The philological and the philosophical versions of tragedy also confront the notion of tragedy as embodied performance and the potential of theatricality itself. Interestingly, contemporary classical scholars like Stephen Halliwell have questioned the logic of the spilt itself that claims that, although the Greeks had a literary/aesthetic theory of tragedy, they lacked a reflective philosophical apparatus that could conceptualize tragedy in ethical and political terms. For Halliwell, as indeed is the case in much recent classical scholarship the Greek sense of the tragic, the 'idea of the tragic' is inextricably linked to its theatricality. In this reading it is Plato, rather than Aristotle who features as the first philosopher of tragedy, interested in its impact on the audience, on the actors, on the ethics of the *polis* and in its general truth claim. Somewhat counter-intuitively, despite Aristotle's advocacy of tragedy's cathartic/redemptive function, it is the philosopher who he is defending tragedy *against*, Plato, who seems to be more concerned both with the 'idea' of the tragic *and* with the spectacular and theatricalized manifestations of that 'idea'. Halliwell writes:

One commonly drawn corollary of the German cast of interest in the tragic is the claim that while ancient Greece created the first and most concentrated tradition of dramatic tragedy, it lacked anything that can be classified as an explicit notion of the tragic. But I contend... that there are important grounds for ascribing to Plato the first conscious delineation of something we can coherently identify as 'the tragic'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 99. Also see Olga Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

It is fascinating that the philosopher of anti-theatricality formulates this 'idea of the tragic'. In many ways, this makes sense, as it is Plato who is interested in the ethical impact of tragedy for the actors, for the audience and for the *polis*. Although Aristotle provides us with a formal, and, as some scholars claim, formalist definition of tragedy,<sup>12</sup> it is Plato who is more concerned with the political, ethical and to use his own term, 'muddy' aspects of tragedy.<sup>13</sup> In his repudiation of tragedy, in *Laws*, *The Republic* but also in *The Symposium*, Plato provides us with one of the first and most insightful accounts of the impact of theatricality both on the body of the actor and on the *body-politic*. Through a kind of negative critique, it is Plato and not Aristotle who is concerned with the fundamental issues of theatricality: its supplementarity, its falseness, its distortion of the divine, its power to distort the truth and our perception of it. In terms that eerily pre-echo twentieth century critiques of the spectacle and spectacularization,<sup>14</sup> Plato seems to provide us not with the redemptive, socially constructive powers of tragedy, but is somewhat graphically and 'dramatically' concerned with the power of tragedy to mislead the audience and demagogically influence the *polis* itself. His notorious term *theatrocracy*, where the discourses of theatricality and spectacularization spill over into the public sphere,

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<sup>12</sup> See Edith Hall, 'Is there a *Polis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*?' in M. S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and Beyond* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 295-309. For Plato's repudiation of the tragic see *Laws*, trans. A. E. Taylor, 1225-1513; *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, pp. 575-844; *Symposium*, trans. A. E. Taylor, pp. 526-74, in *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns.

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of Aristotle's term *catharsis* and its relation to what Nussbaum calls the '*katharsis*... word-family', where it is described as 'clearing up' and 'clarification'... 'as the removal of some obstacle (dirt or blot, or obscurity, or admixture)... 'as clearing up of the vision of the soul of [bodily] obstacles', see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 389-393.

<sup>14</sup> In its most radical and aphoristic mode this critique appears in Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), written in 1967 it came to act as the manifesto of Situationism, expressing the repudiation of the spectacle as the quintessential political tool of capitalism. For a recent insightful contemplation of the relationships between philosophy and media culture – from Aristotle to modernity – see Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2004).

making the political assembly appear as a mere parody of the theatrical audience, are confronted head-on and, I would claim, embraced body and soul in the modernist encounter with Greek tragedy.

In the notorious section of the *Laws* Plato describes the negative impact of theatre on its audience:

Afterward, in the course of time, an unmusical license set in with the appearance of poets who were men of genius but ignorant of what is right and legitimate in the realm of the Muses. Possessed by a frantic and uncontrolled lust for pleasure, they contaminated laments with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs, actually imitated the strain of the flute on the harp, and created a universal confusion of forms [...] By compositions of such a kind and discourse to the same effect, they naturally inspired the multitude with a contempt of musical law, and a conceit of their competence as judges. Thus our once silent audiences have found a voice, in the persuasion that they understood what is good and bad in art; the sovereignty of the best, aristocracy, has given way to an evil sovereignty of the audience, a theatocracy.<sup>15</sup>

In many ways the above passage contains all the contours of the anti-theatrical tradition: the inability of the poets of separate right from wrong, truth from falseness, resulting in an indulgent and lustful relativism; the ways that this is achieved through a disregard of formal attributes and constraints, mixing artistic forms and media; the distorting qualities of imitation itself; and possibly worst of all, the delusional belief

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 700a-b, Trans. A.E. Taylor, in *The Collected Dialogues*, 1225-1513.



that these acts can form an aspect of critical thinking, inspiring the faith in the audience that they can be 'judges'.

Interestingly this kind of Platonism can be traced in the works of Nietzsche but it is also echoed in the anti-theatrical tradition of Christianity itself. So, in many ways the modernist attempts at reconciling tragedy with Christianity, could also be read as addressing the *longue durée* of the anti-theatrical legacy in both its Platonic and Christian ramifications. We might be able to sketch out these parallel anti-theatrical traditions through a broad, etymological genealogy of the term 'theatre'. The complex and sometimes fraught relationships between *theatron* and *theoria*, spectacle and speculative thinking have a long and distinguished history in performance theory, in the philosophies of tragedy but also in Christian theology. They form a potentially enabling critical nexus of terms that will allow us to approach these modernist renditions of Greek/Christian tragedy as *gestures* both in the practice of *theatron* and *theoria*, in a sense re-establishing the broken link between the two. The etymological connections between *theatron* as the 'seeing place' of drama and *theoria* as an activity undertaken by a *theoros* (a viewer or witness), which also entails contemplative, speculative thinking, have been well documented.<sup>16</sup> Françoise Dastur eloquently outlines how the transformation of the speculative and philosophical dimension of *theatron* turned into its evil sister, the outright and distorting spectacularization:

The word *speculatio* comes, of course, from *specto*, to look at, to scrutinise, and was used by Boethius to translate the Greek *theoria* into Latin. But in

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<sup>16</sup> See Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Also see Freddie Rokem, *Philosophers and Thespians*, pp. 25-6.

Christian theology this meaning was forgotten, especially by Thomas Aquinas, who derives *speculatio* from *speculum*, mirror, and relates the word to what Paul says in the first Epistle to the Corinthians (13, 12) concerning the vision of God whom we see now confusedly as 'in a mirror' but whom later, that is to say, after death, we will see 'face to face'. *Speculatio* means, therefore partial and confused knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

This echoes Plato's critique of the distorting and confusing aspects of theatre spectatorship. According to this reading in Christian theology the Greek sense of *theoria*, and the original meaning of *specto* (all connected semantically with looking, scrutinizing, reflecting, but also with the embodied and spatialized dimension of those original etymologies) and speculation become connected with *speculum*, the mirror. The stage itself, as a result, is seen as such a distorting mirror, rather than a site of reflective speculation. This identification of things *spectacular* with distortion and corruption of the truth may partly account for the difficult relationship between Christianity and theatre. At the same time, however, it points to the relationship with the divine, often neglected, that we can also find in the original sense of *theoria*. And this concept of the divine sometimes appears in a heady fusion of Christianity and Greek tragedy, as in the work of T.S. Eliot, or through equally interesting fusions of Orientalism, Primitivism and Hellenism.

The intriguing interface between Hellenism and Primitivism that we find in the theatrical works of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Antonin Artaud but also in Bertolt Brecht

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<sup>17</sup> Françoise Dastur, 'Tragedy and Speculation', in *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 78-88. She writes, 'Thus speculation is connected with the *visio Dei*, the vision of the supersensible, or with what Kant calls "intellectual intuition", an intuition which is refused to finite things, which are only able to have 'sensible intuition', that is, an intuition of what is already given to them through their senses', pp. 78-9.

results both from the fascination with the theatres of South East Asia, Japan and China, but also in the case of Anglophone modernism, from the more direct influence of the 'group' of charismatic Cambridge scholars, known as the Cambridge Ritualists. Although this grouping itself has been recently contested,<sup>18</sup> and although the validity of their theories is constantly re-assessed within classical studies, their impact on actual languages of performance is un-doubtable and has recently received more critical attention.<sup>19</sup> Gilbert Murray's translations and his involvement with actual theatrical productions,<sup>20</sup> the works of Francis Cornford, Arthur Bernard Cook (with Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, providing a general theoretical context), and the work of Jane Harrison offer the modernist playwrights and theatre makers ways of reviving notions of ritual and the sacred, that are at once part of an evolutionary trajectory of theatre and quintessentially modern in their modes of production, and languages of performance. Within this group the centrality of Jane Harrison needs to be stressed both as a scholar and as a symbolic figure (and I would claim as a performer/lecturer as well). Harrison's impact on Sapphic and feminist modernism has been well documented.<sup>21</sup> Her work on Greek religion and

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<sup>18</sup> See Mary Beard, 'Hellas at Cambridge', in *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 109-29. She writes, 'In the case of Ritualism, to talk so consistently, as modern scholars do, of "membership" and "group" glibly concretises and personalizes the fleeting, complicated, overlapping intellectual processes and relationships that (if anything) constitute the "movement", at Cambridge or elsewhere', p. 115. She too concedes, 'Just because *they* didn't write under the banner of Ritualism, doesn't necessarily mean *we* shouldn't use the word. Intellectual and artistic movements have regularly (and often usefully – think of mannerism) been identified retrospectively.', p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> The primary group study is Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (1991, rpt, London: Routledge, 2002), Robert Segal, the series Editor notes in his Preface, 'In literary lingo, they were the first 'myth critics'. Contemporary literary critics like Northrop Frye are their successors. Also we can say that they were the first 'performance critics' if not theorists in a line of thought/practice from Nietzsche onwards', ix. Also see W. M. Calder, ed., *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered*, Illinois Classical Studies, 2, Atlanta, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> See Fiona Macintosh, 'From the Court to the National: The Theatrical Legacy of Gilbert Murray's *Bacchae*', in Christopher Stray, ed., *Gilbert Murray Reassessed: Hellenism, Theatre, and International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 145-65.

<sup>21</sup> See Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison*; also Martha Carpentier, *Ritual, Myth and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot and Woolf* (London: Routledge, 1998), 'Themis in *To the Lighthouse*', pp. 171-88; Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction Between the*

art, drawing to the diverse influences of Durkhiem, Darwin, nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology and theories of matriarchy, but also on modernist theories of time, like those of Bergson, and archaeological discoveries, helps to reconstruct a version of theatre, closely linked with ritual, that does not see it as simply one amongst the arts, but as *the* foundational art-form itself; one that can provide both the lost links with the past, but also help her contemporaries to understand their modernity. Julie Stone Peters has recently claimed that 'her work offered a model for modern theatre historiography' and stresses 'the consequences and meaning of her work not only for twentieth-century theatre but also for the development of theatre history and (eventually) performance studies as academic disciplines'.<sup>22</sup> In positing theatre centre-stage the Cambridge Ritualists and particularly Harrison, seem to be re-working the *theatrum mundi* metaphor and in a concrete modernist manner, their corollaries in the theatre arts, find in their work ways to enact this metaphor and materialize it on the stage. The Cambridge Ritualists offer ways of addressing the Platonic fear of *theatrocracy* and turning it into something positive, critical and enabling, something that has always been part of the evolutionary trajectory of being human.

This humanity, however, despite its modernity or perhaps because of it also entails a primitivist dimension. And in the ways that the Cambridge Ritualists reconfigure the classics, this primitivism is not read in *opposition* to Hellenism or Classicism, but is seen to inhabit the same evolutionary trajectory. These are the Greeks as Primitives as Moderns. So, when Yeats utters his aphoristic proclamation:

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*Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 'Virginia Woolf: Retrieving the Mother', pp. 125-45; Theodore Koulouris, *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf* (Furnham: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Julie Stone Peters, 'Jane Harrison and the Savage Dionysus: Archaeological Voyages, Ritual Origins, Anthropology, and the Modern Theatre', *Modern Drama*, Vol. 51:1, (Spring 2008, 3-4). Pp. 1-41.

‘After us, the Savage God’ after viewing the dress rehearsal of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, directed by Lugné-Poë in 1896, his Savage God is both primitive and modern. Significantly, this appears in an essay written years later in 1914 entitled ‘The Tragic Generation’.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the use of the term ‘Tragic’ is not coincidental here as the Greek model of theatre is the form that receives a foundational refurbishment through these modernist experiments in performance. Through the impact of the Cambridge Ritualists and, of course, Nietzsche, that Savage God is allowed to wear the mask of Dionysus. And this mask, as Yeats himself was later to find out does not even necessarily need to be Greek; it can also be found in the theatres of the so-called Orient or in what were termed as ‘primitive cultures’. This fascination with Hellenist Primitivism does not only appear as a performance trope in the more metaphysical strands of modernist performance, that can be found in the work of Yeats or Eliot, but also manifests itself in the materialist traditions, as in Brecht’s staging of *Antigone*. This interface between Hellenism and Primitivism creates enabling languages for the purposes of performance, ones that do not view the two terms in opposition but more often than not see them as interchangeable.

For T. S. Eliot in particular the *eniautos daimon* of Harrison’s writing on Greek religion, could easily morph into a Nietzschean Dionysus, but also into the figure of Christ. In this way the Cambridge ritualists facilitated the experiments in performance that bridged the binary between Dionysus and the Crucified. Interestingly René Girard refers to the ‘anthropologists’ of the modernist period as being significant in understanding the similarities between the two ‘collective deaths’ of Dionysus and

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<sup>23</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘The Tragic Generation’ (1914) in *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 279-349, 348-9. For an analysis of this event and its impact on modernist theatre aesthetics see Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), ‘Introduction: Savages, Gods, Robots and Revolutionaries: Modernist Performance’, pp. 1-9.

the Crucified.<sup>24</sup> I believe that this specific group of modernist classicists had a direct impact on bridging that divide as well, especially when it came to creating modernist Christian tragedies, either reverent ones (T. S. Eliot)<sup>25</sup> or blasphemous ones (Antonin Artaud).

## ii. Experiments in Modernist Christian Tragedies

**'he [Orestes] follows the Furies as immediately and as unintelligibly as the Disciples dropping their nets'.<sup>26</sup> (T. S. Eliot)**

This statement expressed by T. S. Eliot in a letter to his producer E. Martin Brown, providing notes on the production of his play *The Family Reunion*, clearly underlines how inextricably bound for him where the discourses of classical tragedy and Christianity in his search for a modernist poetic drama. It is an extraordinary phrase that conflates Christ and Dionysus, and reads the passion of Christ itself as a tragedy. *The Family Reunion*, Eliot's adaptation of *The Oresteia* appeared in 1939. Four years earlier, in 1935, he wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), a fascinating attempt at a modernist Greek tragedy. It is an attempt that at once engages the idea of tragedy, re-working it through Christian theology, and the formal demands of training actors and chorus, while also dealing with audience reception. It presents what some scholars would consider an impossibility: a Christian tragedy.

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<sup>24</sup> René Girard, 'Dionysus and the Crucified', p. 820.

<sup>25</sup> In *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot acknowledges this influence and the impact it had on an understanding of *both* the 'what used to be called the Scriptures'. He writes of the modernity of Murray: 'As a Hellenist, he is very much of the present day, and a very important figure on the day. This day began, in a sense, with [E. B.] Tylor and a few German anthropologists; since then we have acquired sociology and social psychology, we have watched the clinics of Ribot and Janet, we have read books from Vienna and heard a discourse of Bergson; a philosophy arose at Cambridge; social emancipation crawled abroad; our historical knowledge has of course increased; and we have a curious Freudian-social-rationalistic-higher-critical interpretation of the Classics and what used to be called the Scriptures'. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, [1920] 1967), pp. 75-76.

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot Qtd in E. Martin Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 108.

Eliot's conflation of a Christian martyr (Thomas Becket) with the tragic protagonist, and the tragic chorus with the chorus of the women of Canterbury, can be read as a direct result of the influence of the Cambridge Ritualists and their ritualistic, evolutionary model of drama. He writes in *The Criterion* in 1923 in an article entitled 'Dramatis Personae' in terms that echo the writings of the Cambridge ritualists:

Instead of pretending that the stage gesture is a copy of reality, let us adopt a literal untruth, a thorough-going convention, a ritual. For the stage – not only in its remote origins, but always – is a ritual, and the failure of the contemporary stage to satisfy the craving for ritual is one of the reasons why it is not a living art.<sup>27</sup>

Eliot was also familiar with the work of Edward Gordon Craig and his writing on acting. He had read Craig's *The Art of the Theatre* (1905) while an undergraduate and was well versed in the debates about puppets and actors (he had defended Craig in an article in *The Dial* in 1921). The invitation from the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral to write a play,<sup>28</sup> allowed Eliot to bring together his experiments in poetic drama, with his interest in reviving Greek tragedy through both the prisms of Christianity *and* modernism. This attempt offered Eliot the opportunity to address the 'problem of the chorus'. Although it is viewed by most philosophical critics as the quintessential anti-modern aspect of Greek tragedy, modernist experiments in

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<sup>27</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Dramatis Personae", in *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, Vol. 2: 1919-1926*, ed. Anthony Cuba and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, and London: Faber and Faber, 2014), pp. 430-4, p. 434.

<sup>28</sup> E. Martin Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays*, pp. 34-79.

performance find in the Greek chorus a space (both conceptual and physical) to rehearse new theories of acting and audience reception. Here is Eliot, talking about the uses of the chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*:

In making use of [the chorus] we do not aim to *copy* Greek drama. There is a good deal about the Greek theatre that we do not know, and never shall know. But we know that some of its conventions cannot be ours. The characters talk too long; the Chorus has too much to say and holds up the action; usually not enough happens; and the Greek notion of climax is not ours. But the chorus has always fundamentally the same uses. It mediates between the action and the audience; it intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as the audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people.<sup>29</sup>

This is a sophisticated reading of the chorus both in terms of what it can offer theatrically and for the ways that Eliot considers it strange (“never shall know”). It posits the chorus as a mode of mediation that enables a kind of “double vision” in the audience. This meta-theatrical, and quotational use of the chorus, as commenting both on the action and on the audience, is a trope that many modernist theatre makers will employ (including Brecht and Artaud). For Eliot it marks the beginning of his experiments with the chorus, always parallel to those in poetic drama, that continued throughout his life. These choruses help create a modernist version of tragedy that is at once a Christian liturgical drama.

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<sup>29</sup> T. S. Eliot Qtd in David E. Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 52.



Eliot was well aware that he could not repeat the success of *Murder in the Cathedral* partly because he could not repeat these stylized, ritualistic choruses and partly because in his later ventures he could not have access to that 'organic audience' that participated in the play as a religious experience, as the play was created specifically for the congregation of Canterbury Cathedral. He claims that 'for a beginner... the path was made easy' and attributes this to three main factors: the subject matter was 'generally admitted to be suitable for verse'; the play was produced 'for a rather special kind of audience'; and 'finally it was a religious play'.<sup>30</sup> These three factors - heightened language, an 'organic' audience and the play as a religious experience - characterize Greek tragedy as well and it is these aspects that present the most demanding challenges for modernist theatre makers.

These challenges were also addressed in what was probably the most successful conflation of Greek tragedy and Christian ritual of the period, in the work of the seminal German director Max Reinhardt. It might be interesting to speculate whether Eliot possibly got some of his ideas for staging *Murder in the Cathedral* from the German director, who had a huge impact on the London stage. Apart from the very successful tours of *Oedipus the King*, Reinhardt was the first European director to stage a Christian drama with a heavily Greek inflection. For he was not only responsible to reviving Greek tragedy within a modernist aesthetic,<sup>31</sup> he was also responsible for creating the first production of *Everyman* (in 1911, and then inaugurating the Salzburg Festival in 1920). Reinhardt's work caused a stir in London with the tour of his production of *Oedipus Rex* (1910-12). This was a so-called 'arena' production originally presented at the Circus Schumann in Berlin.

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<sup>30</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (1951; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 132-147, p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> J. L. Styan, *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

However, in 1911 Reinhardt dazzled the London audiences with another 'arena' production, *The Miracle*. This was a huge undertaking within the vast space of Olympia in London. J. L. Styan writes that for the purposes of this production, 'Olympia was to become a twelfth-century Gothic cathedral... To assure the effect, there were to be six-foot-high gold lamps, a towering gold canopy over the Madonna, and stained-glass windows, including a circular one of 50 feet in diameter, larger than the original in Cologne and three times the size of the rose window in Notre Dame'.<sup>32</sup> Surely those numbers and those comparisons were flirting with blasphemy. Not only were Reinhardt's productions ignoring the historically fraught relationship between theatre/tragedy and Christianity, but they were very deliberately drawing parallels between the aesthetics of tragedy and Christian ritual. The theatricality and the spectacle created by *The Miracle* were questioned in the reviews of the period. *The Telegraph* accused Reinhardt of 'playing to the gallery with the Crucifix', and *The Times* reviewer stated that the production had 'a pervasive sense of something strained and false and theatrical'.<sup>33</sup> Still, what became startlingly clear with the production of *The Miracle*, was that Reinhardt had created a sense of a community ritual heavily infused by the heritage of Catholic Christianity, that as J. L. Styan writes 'he could not wholly reject, even had he wished to',<sup>34</sup> a ritual that would also infect the ways he staged Greek tragedies.

T. S. Eliot admired Reinhardt and it is very likely that he would have attended the production of *The Miracle*. However, he makes no direct mention of it. He does state in a letter to Herbert Read (1929) that Craig or Reinhardt would be the ideal directors of a proposed stage version of 'The Hollow Men', but he is concerned that

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

the 'author's responsibility would be nil'.<sup>35</sup> Apart from the Catholic excesses, which Eliot might have also found distasteful in Reinhardt, his main concern was one of stage authorship. In the case of *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot had full control of staging. It is important to underline that writing a Christian tragedy was as important as staging a Christian tragedy for Eliot, and that he claimed authorship for both.

Dionysus and the Crucified are also fused into one character in W. B. Yeats's play *Resurrection* (1927), which presents in the form of questions and answers (antiphones perhaps) a discussion about the nature of Christ among three emblematic figures: a Greek, a Hebrew, and a Syrian (or Egyptian in the *Adelphi* version). This debate is threatened by an off-stage ecstatic chorus of Dionysus, which is performing horrific rituals. This brief play which combines prose and verse exhibits many of the traits that were to characterize Yeatsian drama: it features a chorus of musicians, it uses the mask, the folding and unfolding of the curtain, and it was specifically written for a small studio audience such as that of The Peacock Theatre (the smaller theatre of The Abbey). Here is the opening song that, as Yeats states in his directions, is for "the folding and the unfolding of the curtain":

I saw a staring virgin stand  
Where holy Dionysus died,  
And tear the heart out of his side,  
And lay the heart upon her hand  
And bear that beating heart away;  
And then did all the Muses sing

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<sup>35</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 4, eds., Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 734

Of Magnus Anus at the spring,  
As though God's death were but a play.<sup>36</sup>

All these formal aspects are borrowed from the Noh, and have parallels in Yeats's earlier *Four Plays for Dancers* (*At the Hawk's Well*, 1917; *The Only Jealousy of Emmet*, 1919; *The Dreaming of the Bones*, 1919; *Calvary*, 1920). Yeats had spent considerable time with Ezra Pound in Sussex in 1913 familiarizing himself with the Fenollosa Noh manuscript, and witnessing performances by the Japanese dancer Michio Ito. *Resurrection* is dedicated to a Japanese admirer called Junzo Sato. However, Yeats's theatre of this period is not solely influenced by the Noh tradition. While he is writing *Resurrection* he also returns to a project that he would pursue for many years: the translations of *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. (He had initially attempted and abandoned a verse translation of *Oedipus the King* in 1904).

The language that Yeats chose in his translations was a combination of prose and verse (prose for the protagonist and verse for the chorus). The quest for a language that could speak to the big national themes and attract large audiences fits in quite neatly with Yeats's fascination with the oral and popular tradition. Like Eliot, Yeats views the difficulty of reviving the poetry of the Greek plays as a general symptom of a modernist 'malaise', a world where language has been debased and lost its 'organic' links with a living community. Yeats finds the alternative, ideal audience on the Aran islands, and in line with many of the linguistic experiments of the Celtic Twilight (also undertaken by J. M. Synge and later Louise MacNeice who translates *Agamemnon* in 1937), uses rhythms and patterns that he considers to be

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<sup>36</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. II The Plays*, eds. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2001), 481-2.

part of an organic community, that somehow has not been marred by modernity. In addition to the linguistic inspiration that Yeats garners from the Aran islands, might he also have been inspired by the predominantly Catholic Christian rituals of the islands? Although Yeats was a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, during this period in his life, and fueled by nationalist sentiment, he exhibits a strong attraction towards Catholicism in general, which inspired both the Celtic Twilight and the independence movement. Like Reinhardt, he might have found this ritualist aspect of Christianity impossible to resist.

### **iii. Experiments in Modernist Anti-Christian Tragedy**

No one will believe me  
and I can see the public shrugging its shoulders  
but the so-called Christ is none other than he  
who in the presence of the crab louse god  
consented to live without a body,  
while an army of men  
descended from the cross,  
to which god thought he had long since nailed them,  
has revolted,  
and, armed with steel,  
with blood,  
with fire, and with bones,  
advances, reviling the Invisible

to have done with THE JUDGMENT OF GOD.<sup>37</sup>

The Aran islands offer an unlikely connection between Yeats and the damned prophet of The Theatre of Cruelty: Antonin Artaud. A decade before Artaud wrote *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* (1948), he too visited the Aran islands as part of his quest for sites (geographical, philosophical, and theatrical), that he considered to be raw, exotic and ritualistic. He was promptly deported, probably having suffered a mental breakdown. One could envisage a notional play, where Yeats and Artaud meet on the Aran islands.

At first glance it may appear somewhat incongruous to include Artaud in a study of modernist Christian tragedies. However, as the above quotation clearly reveals, throughout his life (as an actor, playwright and theorist), Artaud was obsessed with the figure of the Crucified. Indeed, we can claim that Artaud's idea of the 'holy actor' could itself be seen as a transformation, or yet another masking of the Christ/Dionysus figure. As a young actor he played the role of the monk in Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), having learned the craft of the actor under the tutelage of the charismatic Charles Dullin. His work draws heavily on Christian ritual and on Christian notions of sacrifice. However, as several scholars have noted, it is the specific tradition of Gnosticism that seems to permeate his work. Despite his damning of Greek tragedy in the figure of Oedipus in 'An End to Masterpieces' and his life-long dislike of Christianity, this analysis claims that both traditions of Classical tragedy and Christianity play a significant role in shaping the

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<sup>37</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-), vol. xiii. 86-87. Also quoted in Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 204. This was written for French radio, see Allen Weiss, 'From Schizophrenia to Schizophonia: Antonin Artaud's *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*', in *Phantasmic Radio* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 9-35.

Artaudian aesthetic of a 'Theatre of Cruelty'.<sup>38</sup> And this principle of 'Cruelty' that Artaud both codified and enacted throughout his life, has proved particularly formative for understanding the aesthetics and the philosophy of tragedy in a Godless world. Indeed, in terms of performance practice, we can claim that Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' has probably been one of the more inspirational motors for reviving tragedy after modernism.

In her illuminating reading of Artaud, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, Jane Goodall makes a convincing case for reading Artaud as both a continuation of Nietzsche and as a revival of the Gnostic legacy. She ends her reading by stating that, 'If Nietzsche's philosophy has led the way in the modern assault on the onto-theological foundations of Western humanism, Artaud's dramaturgy re-echoes the terms and images of an older and absolute assault'.<sup>39</sup> This reading places the work of Artaud within a genealogy of assaults against Western humanism that have as their starting point and as their inspiration the early Christian blasphemous tradition of Gnosticism.

We owe our understanding of the 'Gnostic' Artaud initially to Susan Sontag, who re-introduced and re-framed him for the thinkers of post-structuralism and difference. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to present a detailed theological account of the heretical movement of the second century Christian Church. In very general and somewhat schematic terms, this early Christian sect believed that the world was created not by a benevolent God but by a lesser, evil demiurge, the central tenant of Gnosticism being that humans are never at home in the world,

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<sup>38</sup> See Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. and intro. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1976), 'An End to Masterpieces', pp. 252-259; 'The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto', pp. 242-252.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, p. 220.

‘strangers to themselves’ as Nietzsche would later proclaim. Everything in the world is seen to be the double of its better, ideal version, and we are doomed to an existence of distortion and corruption of reality. An important characteristic of this Hellenistic heresy was also that it was syncretic and eclectic, combining elements of Greek philosophy (especially neo-Platonism), and many religions and philosophies from the Middle East and the far East. The gnostic world is barren of meaning and redemption, and humans are self-alienated creatures. The origin of Gnosis is located in the ability of human beings to become aware of their alienated condition. At the same time, there is an acute sense of suffering and anxiety that comes with this awareness. The awareness itself is not necessarily seen as cathartic. Susan Sontag states in her writing’s on Artaud:

The leading energies of Gnosticism come from metaphysical anxiety and acute psychological distress – the sense of being abandoned, of being alien, of being possessed by demonic powers which prey on the human spirit in a cosmos vacated by the divine.<sup>40</sup>

This is clearly not the world of Greek tragedy, where knowledge and catharsis redeem suffering, no matter how horrific the deeds. So, not really the world of the ecstatic Dionysus, but neither is it the world of the Crucified Christ of Christianity. Artaud’s theatre shares quite a few traits of the Gnostic tradition. These can be summarized as follows: the absolute awareness of humanity’s alienated condition; the revelation of the ‘doubleness’ of existence and the ‘doubleness’ of human beings themselves (‘An estranged or alien self resides in each human being as a spark of

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Approaching Artaud’, introduction to *Selected Writings*, p. xlv.



the dispersed *pneuma* waiting to be released from the corporeal form that prevents it from being reunited with the “great first Life”, the hidden God’, writes Goodall);<sup>41</sup> the conviction that the world of forms is false.

It is very difficult to separate the work from the life of this visionary prophet of the theatre as his own life may be read as enacting the suffering of a Gnostic martyr/actor. And here the lack of the singularity or separability of the aesthetic might be useful in trying to understand that heady fusion that is the life and works of Artaud. A month after the broadcasting of *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* Artaud passed away, having spent his final years in various mental institutions. Perhaps the impact of Artaud can be felt on the following generation of theatre makers and philosophers, whose lives and works were not so completely intertwined. The thinkers of difference from Sontag to Deleuze and Guattari to Derrida and Kristeva, revive Artaud as a philosopher, and many post-war and contemporary theatre directors re-work Artaud’s concept of cruelty, particularly in their various approaches to staging Greek tragedy (as we can see in the work of Richard Schechner, Jan Fabre and Theodoros Terzopoloulos). It is tempting to read Artaud’s blazing manifesto for The Theatre of Cruelty in *The Theatre and its Double* as an attempt at a ritualistic sacrifice of both Greek tragedy (‘An End to Masterpieces’) and Christianity (*To be Done...*). As with any ritualistic sacrifice, these brutal, violent and ultimately cruel attacks contain within them the possibility of re-birth and regeneration/resurrection.

Another paradoxical protagonist for the appropriation of Christian ritual for the modernist stage is Bertolt Brecht. In many ways, the binary opposite of Artaud

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<sup>41</sup> Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, p. 15.

(where Artaud represents the archetypal and mythopoetic on the stage, Brecht represents the historical and materialist), Brecht's edifice of Epic theatre can be read in at least some of its manifestations as re-working some fundamental traits of what we may understand as a Christian aesthetic. If we consider the impact on his work of his messianic Marxist friend, Walter Benjamin, then those traits could be read as Judeo-Christian. In Benjamin's essay 'What is Epic Theatre', he very deliberately reads Epic theatre as part of a genealogy of theatricality that includes the mystery plays. He writes:

This important but poorly marked road, which may here serve as the image of a tradition, went via Roswitha and the mystery plays in the Middle Ages, via Gryphius and Calderon in the Baroque age... It is a European road, but a German one as well – provided that we may speak of a road and not of a secret smuggler's path by which the legacy of the medieval and Baroque drama has reached us. It is this mule track, neglected and overgrown, which comes to light today in the dramas of Brecht.<sup>42</sup>

This evocative quotation from Benjamin, written in his characteristic literary style itself draws upon Judeo-Christian imagery and tropes (the path, the mule, 'neglected and overgrown'). Importantly, it creates a lineage for Brecht's Epic theatre that does not read it in opposition to Christian ritual. Epic theatre's use of allegory and parable, its exposition of the 'doubleness' of theatre through highlighting theatricality, its fear of complete identification and manipulation of the audience all bear a Platonic

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<sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, intro, Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p. 146.

signature, but also have precedents in the Christian mystery cycles. What for the cycles would have been blasphemous (for example, the identification of the actor with the role - who can pretend to be God, who the devil?), for Epic theatre is an emblem of false consciousness and ideological manipulation. This analogy is not as tenuous as it may appear, especially if we also underline the pedagogical dimension of both traditions. All these aspects come together in many a Brecht play, however, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, is especially notable in this context as apart from the formal aspects of Christian theatre it also thematically reworks the bible story about the wisdom of Solomon (which is also a Chinese parable).

This quotation is also significant in the ways it interpolates religious tropes and discourses in its description of what Benjamin considers a quintessentially modernist theatre. And in doing so it enacts another significant principle at work in the writings of Walter Benjamin, where modernism and modernity more generally are not viewed as an abrupt break from religion. Benjamin's reading of Epic theatre (and his reading of tragedy in *The Origin of Tragic German Drama*) does not view it in opposition to the Christian dramas of the Middle ages but as a continuation of similar formal and thematic concerns about representing the truth, about audience reception and about the relationships between pleasure and pedagogy. This resists one of the grand narratives of modernity that views it as an all-encompassing linear and triumphant march towards secularization. In this sense, religion is not viewed as pure ideology, and modernity is not viewed as expressing the 'disenchantment' of the world. In establishing a link between Brecht's Epic Theatre and Christian early modern drama, Benjamin is underlining the force of religion within modernity, and in a sense he is also being a good Marxist in presenting these relationships as more dialectical / dialogical and not simply oppositional. I have written extensively about

Brecht's debt to Greek tragedy (despite his proclamations),<sup>43</sup> which is clearly evidenced in his version of *Antigone*, and here we can also see Epic Theatre as inhabiting a lineage of Christian drama.

There is much more that can be said about Epic theatre and Christian drama and ritual. I have, however, chosen this iconic Benjamin quotation as it acts as a kind of constellation of ideas that helps to illuminate the rich and complex interconnections between Epic theatre, Christian drama and classical tragedy. It is also an eerily prophetic quotation as it pre-echoes Benjamin's own plight across another smuggler's path on the border between Spain and France, the Route Lister named after the famous Republican general of the Spanish Civil War who led his troops along the same path. This is the path that would lead to his death, and in another twist of fate, this messianic Jewish Marxist thinker was buried in a Catholic cemetery.

The protagonist of Nietzsche's anguished cry that 'God is dead' is also anxious about the absence of festivals and rituals that might result from this death. This chapter has traced some of the ways in which this 'death' is dramatized through the encounters with tragedy, the death of which is also supposedly hailed by modernity. As René Girard states, 'The death of God is also his birth',<sup>44</sup> as this death will always be re-enacted through sacrificial rituals and rites. Within modernist performance these rites may be sacred, but they may also be profane. Whether he might be present, absent or hidden, whether as theme or form the Christian God and his rituals occupy a central position in modernist theatre experimentation. And this

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<sup>43</sup> Olga Taxidou, 'Machines and Models for Modern Tragedy: Brecht/Berlau, *Antigone-Model 1948*', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, edited by Rita Felski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 241-262.

<sup>44</sup> René Girard, 'Dionysus versus the Crucified', p. 831.

Christian God is usually shadowed, or doubled by his Greek equivalent, joined by a paratactic *and*, re-writing Nietzsche's binary as Dionysus *and* the Crucified.

Olga Taxidou

University of Edinburgh / New York University